

Alumni Profile on Will Harris

Will Harris, (BSA - [Animal Science](#), '76) owns White Oak Pastures, his family's 1,000-acre southwest Georgia cattle farm.

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Fourth-Generation Cattleman Takes Family Farm in New Direction

By Sharon Omahen

Will Harris spends most of his time caring for the land and cattle that have provided a living for four generations of his family. His 1,000-acre southwest Georgia farm, White Oak Pastures, is a family legacy. But things have changed a bit. He hopes those changes will ensure a spot on the farm for future generations.

"My great-grandfather started our farm in Early County in 1866 after what he called the Northern invasion," Harris said. "We've always been cattlemen, I'm a full-time cattleman and this has always been a cattle farm."

By the turn of the 20th century, Harris' grandfather, Will Sr., was using a muledrawn wagon to deliver White Oak beef and pork to four general stores, a hotel and a boarding house.

After World War II, Harris' father, Will Jr., ran the family farm under the industrial, factory-farming model. He raised calves on his farm in Georgia and shipped them to the Midwest for finishing on grain in feedlots.

Harris earned a degree in animal science from the University of Georgia College of Agriculture in 1976. After graduation, he took the reins of the farm and continued raising cattle the way his father did and the way most Georgia cattlemen do.

Today, though, the 51-year-old Harris runs the family farm his way, while holding true to his family's traditions.

"We have 650 mama cows, and we save 100 heifers every year," he said. "We have a closed herd, which means we only bring bulls on the farm to bring new genetics along. The genetics in my herd can be traced back to my grandfather's cracker cattle."

In the early 1990s, concerned about the future of his farm and the American family farm as a whole, Harris began researching ways to add value to his products and make his farm business stronger. He decided to try his hand in the organic market by producing grassfed beef. But would his new product get the consumer support needed to be successful in the marketplace?

Before Harris ventured into this new territory, he consulted with CAES agricultural economists. Using funding from a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant awarded to Harris, the UGA Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development conducted a feasibility study on grass-fed beef. The results gave Harris the marketing data and the encouragement he needed to move forward with his new venture.

In 1995, he began switching his cattle from their traditional grain diet to a 100-percent forage diet. The result is Harris' niche product, White Oak Pastures grass-fed ground beef.

White Oak Pastures Grass-Fed Ground Beef is now sold from Florida to Maine through Tree of Life, a health-food distributor, and at Publix Super Markets across the Southeast.

"The only weapon I can use to keep myself and my family in the cattle business is to have my own branded, value-added product," Harris said. "It's a product that high-end, sophisticated, well-informed consumers can choose over commodity beef that comes from another country."

Will Harris relies on chefs like Athena Penson to prepare the samples he shares at various events across the Southeast. Penson is shown preparing meatballs made from White Oak Pastures beef and "just a touch of salt."

To provide shoppers the best possible product, Harris decided to distribute his beef solely as ground beef. "My cattle are 100-percent grass-fed, so they're lean," Harris said. "As a result, the meat is not as fatty, so while my steaks taste great, they can be a little tough. I know just enough about what consumers want to know that I can't sell tough steaks."

Harris uses all the cuts of beef in his grass-fed cattle to create what he calls "a real premium ground beef."

Harris doesn't sit back and rely on these retailers to sell his product. He hits the road to promote it, one handshake and one meatball at a time. Often accompanied by his daughter Jenni, Harris attends trade shows and events across the state to spread the word about his family's product.

At a recent Taste of Atlanta event, Harris and his traveling team of chefs cooked 160 pounds of White Oak's ground-beef meatballs. Each free sample comes with Harris' testimony and anecdotes of why he believes his beef is tastier, healthier and safer for consumers.

"I've had UGA run fatty acid and lipid profiles on my beef, and they found that it's high in the good fats, omega 3 and CLAs and low in the saturated fats," Harris said. "It tastes better, but that's subjective. Honestly, a lot of high-end chefs have told me personally that they prefer grass-fed beef."

Harris had more than his family's profit margin in mind when he made the transition to a grass-fed system. He had his animals' welfare in mind, too. Harris believes his cattle lead a more humane life, and Humane Farm Animal Care agrees.

"My farm was the first farm east of the Mississippi to be certified as a humane animal care farm," he said. "We treat our animals with dignity and respect all their lives. They're never confined, and they're never harvested in an inhumane manner." Harris is also proud of the fact that he doesn't use antibiotics or hormones on his farm.

He also believes the grass-fed system is better for the environment and the land. "My land is improved every year by the way we treat it," he said. "We don't use chemical fertilizers. We just plain don't use chemicals on the land."

If those weren't enough reasons to switch to raising grass-fed cattle, Harris saves fuel using this system, too. "It takes 134 gallons more crude oil to raise a feedlot calf than it does a grass-fed one," he said. "Clearly, it's just not the right thing to do for the animal. It's also the energy-efficient thing to do."

Harris believes his forefathers would be happy with the changes he's made at White Oak Pastures.

"My grandfather used to say, 'If you take care of the land and the cows, they'll take care of you.' That certainly defines the way we run our farm today. We've still got a long way to go, but we've learned a lot. We've got good land, good cows and a good purpose for being here and doing what we're doing."

Source: <http://unit.caes.uga.edu/alumni/southscapes/index.html>